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978-1-107-41615-4 - New Readings in Shakespeare: Volume Two:
The Histories the Tragedies
C. J. Sisson
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KING JOHN

ACT 1

1.54 *Cordelion*¹

If we are to correct *Cordelion* to *Cœur-de-Lion*, as even in some recent texts, we are going against a frequent Elizabethan form of the name, an anglicized version of it. It is as much a sophistication as the reading *Brittany* for the Folio and Elizabethan *Britain*. These were the forms used by Shakespeare, and they should be preserved.

1.236–7 *Sir Robert could doe well, marrie to confesse
 Could get me Sir Robert could not doe it;*

New Cambridge, following Vaughan's variation upon Pope, reads:

*Sir Robert could do well—marry, to confess—
 Could he get me. Sir Robert could not do it;*

Alexander reads:

*Sir Robert could do: well—marry, to confess—
 Could he get me? Sir Robert could not do it.*

I accept Pope's insertion of *he* in l. 237, but I propose a radically different reading which is in accordance with the Folio punctuation, seems to me to be more in character, and gives a better sense. The parenthesis seems to me out of place in this highly unapologetic Bastard.

READ: *Sir Robert could do well; marry to confess
 He could get me, Sir Robert could not do it.*

(I now prefer this reading to my original *Could he get me*.) The omitted initial *he* might well have been in the form of *a*, and the more easily missed therefore. There is a marked

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emphasis on *me* which contrasts ‘do well’ with ‘get *me*’, and almost justifies italics. ‘Sir Robert could play his part well enough in getting a son; but if put on his oath to say that he could beget *me*, he could not do it.’

‘Confess’ is often used in evidence in Elizabethan English to mean ‘agree’, not necessarily a guilty admission.

1.256–7 *Heauen lay not my transgression to my charge,
 That art the issue of my deere offence*

Rowe, following F 4, emended *That art* to *Thou art*, in order to make sense of the first line, and so Kittredge and Alexander read. But *New Cambridge*, following Staunton, emends the second *my* in l. 256 to *thy*, and leaves l. 257 as in Folio. I have no doubt that the thought and feeling of the speech point to the latter emendation, and that the compositor merely repeated the *my* from *my transgression*, a more plausible error than to misread *That* for *Thou*.

Lady Faulconbridge could not well pray for absolution from her own sin. But she could well pray that her guilt should not fall upon her son too, that the sin of the mother should not be visited upon her child, a thought that haunted Elizabethans, familiar as they were with the Bible, as it haunted Shakespeare’s Henry the Fifth before Agincourt, and Constance in this play (2.1.179).

READ: *to thy charge*,

ACT 2

1.104–7 *That Geoffrey was thy elder brother borne,
 And this his sonne, England was Geffreys right,
 And this is Geffreyes in the name of God:
 How comes it then that thou art call’d a King,*

New Cambridge reads:

[he points to Angiers
*And this is Geffrey’s in the name of God:
 How comes it then that thou art called a king,*

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I suggest the following reading:

And this is Geoffrey's [points to Arthur]. *In the name of God,*

How comes it then that thou art called a king,

'Geoffrey', says King Philip to John, 'was thy elder brother, and this (Arthur) is his son. England was Geoffrey's by right, and this (Arthur) is the representative of Geoffrey's rights.'

1.144 *As great Alcides shoes upon an Ass:*

Theobald confidently read *shows*, i.e. 'as great Alcides' (robe) would show upon an ass', and *New Cambridge* follows, with Kittredge and Alexander. The emendation is of course attractive, and brings in Hercules' lion's skin to join Richard's worn by Austria. But it cannot be argued that the emendation is necessary, only that it is plausible, with the spelling *show* for *shoe*. But one wonders why a compositor, with *shows* before him (*show* was more rarely spelled *shoe* than the converse) should read and set up *shoes*. The ass, as Malone points out, has hoofs as well as a back. And Steevens cites a number of references to Hercules' shoes, which were perhaps better known even than his robe in popular imagery. I find the reading forced, moreover. One might have expected:

As great Alcides' on an ass's back.

My only hesitancy comes from the line following:

But Ass, Ile take that burthen from your backe,

The insult of calling a man an ass was, however, mostly linked up with a reference to its hoofs. The insult seems sufficient, and in the Bastard's vein. And the Folio reading should stand, in the absence of manifest corruption, which cannot be alleged.

READ: *As great Alcides' shoes upon an ass.*

1.152 *England and Ireland, Angiers, Toraine, Maine,*

It is common to emend *Angiers* to *Anjou*, even though admitting that Shakespeare confused *Angiers* with *Anjou*. This is unashamed 'improvement', and cannot be justified, though all recent editors accept the emendation. Holinshed also uses *Anjou* and *Angiers* with equal indifference.

1.215 *Comfort yours Citties eies, your winking gates:*

Capell suggested *Confronts*, with general acceptance, as in *New Cambridge*. I prefer, however, Rowe's *Confront*, with the plural subject of *preparation* and *proceeding*, an easy misreading by the compositor, whose final *s* in *yours* is a mere slip.

1.432–4 *Such as she is, in beautie, vertue, birth,
 Is the yong Dolphin euery way compleat,
 If not compleat of, say he is not shee,*

Hanmer meets the difficulty of l. 434 by reading *O say for of, say*. *New Cambridge* suggests, but does not read, *all, say*. Kittredge reads, *I say for of, say*. Corruption is manifest to all except Alexander, who reads the line as in Folio, but preceded by a dash.

I suggest *completed* for *compleat of*, with some graphic plausibility. The sense would then be an anticipation of later lines in the speech. 'If he is not completed—and he will not be completed till he is joined with Blanche—he will be less complete than Blanche now is.' 'Completed' has the sense both of perfection and of wanting nothing.

READ: *If not completed, say he is not shee;*

1.438 *Left to be finished by such as shee,*

I see no justification for the emendation of the Folio *such as she* to *such a she*, which 'Dr Thirlby prescribed' and Theobald and *New Cambridge* accepted.

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1.487 *For Angiers, and faire Toraine Maine, Poyctiers,*
New Cambridge and others correct *Angiers* to *Anjou* here as above, 1. 152, and elsewhere, but leave *Poictiers*. To be logical, they should surely correct all Shakespeare's geography, and read also *Poitou* for *Poyctiers*. I prefer to read with Shakespeare *Angiers* and *Poictiers*, and *Anjou* where he reads so, as in l. 528 below. These readings are not compositors' errors.

ACT 3

1.155–6 *But as we, vnder heauen, are supream head,*
So vnder him that great supremacy

It is well known that the censorship interfered with oaths and blasphemy in the hands of Sir Henry Herbert, and that 'gingerbread' expletives were substituted in the Folio in many places for the less inhibited originals. It seems to me that where the evidence is reasonably clear we may properly restore these originals to the text. In this instance the *Book of Common Prayer*, with other documents, and the use of *him* in l. 156 corroborate Collier's *God*.

READ: *But as we, under God, are supreme head,*
So under Him that great supremacy

1.258–9 *France, thou maist hold a serpent by the tongue,*
A cased Lion by the mortall paw,

Theobald read *chaféd* for *cased*, and recent editors follow. Dover Wilson assumes the compositor's omission of the *h* of *chafed*, and the corrector's alteration of *cafed* to *cased*, an elaborate process, to justify the reading. It seems more natural for Shakespeare here to be taking an image from experience. The one place where one is likely to take a lion by the paw is in a Zoo, and accidents are frequent to this day from such foolhardiness. The Lions in the Tower were one of London's sights in Shakespeare's day, and there was a white lion kept in the Bear Garden. On all grounds I

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therefore suggest *caged*, which Dover Wilson records also as a suggestion of Moore Smith's, though he reports him as thinking of a man shut up in a cage with a lion. I do not, however, pretend to explain how the misreading arose in the press.

READ: *A caged lion*

3.1–2 *So shall it be: your Grace shall stay behinde
 So strongly guarded:*

Letsom proposed *More* for the second *So*, which *New Cambridge* accepts. Kittredge and Alexander retain *So*. The second *So* was perhaps caught up from above. I am disposed to be assured that there is corruption, though for a somewhat different reason. I suggest the reading *And* for the second *So*, with a certain emphasis in the word. A particular form of ampersand as an abbreviation for *And*, in frequent use, could readily be misread as *So*, and this is what may have happened.

READ: *And strongly guarded.*

3.39 *Sound on into the drowzie race of night:*

The early editors accepted *race* as giving sense, 'mankind at night', but read *one* for *on*, 'sounding one o'clock.' In the nineteenth century, *race* only was found unsatisfactory, and Collier proposed *ear*, accepted by most editors now, including *New Cambridge* and Kittredge. Alexander however retains *race*, which he here glosses as 'course' (presumably the space through which Night passes in her course). I find it difficult to accept either defence of the Folio *race*. But I find more difficulty with the explanation offered by Dover Wilson for the presumed Folio misreading of *race* for *eare*. This involves a foul *e* box, resulting in *eare* being set up as *care*, and the corrector transposing *c* and *r*, thus arriving at *race*, a rather far-fetched theory. I cannot see why a corrector should change ?n unintelligible *care* to a more unintelligible *race*.

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I offer the emendation of *face* for *race*, with the suggestion that the *r* in the Folio *race* is possibly a broken *f*, though we may be driven to ‘foul case’ as an alternative explanation. Dr McManaway, when consulted, examined ten copies of the Folio at the Folger Library, and reported the *r* to be worn or broken in some copies but fairly clear in others. In the two copies that I have examined myself the foot of the letter is abnormal to my eyes. But re-examination, upon Dr McManaway’s report, left me more doubtful. Dr Pafford upon minute inspection of the University of London copy found the letter defective but was satisfied that it is an *r*, though not impossible as a broken *f*. The Second Folio reads *race*. The reading, however, gives a good sense and a vivid image. King John’s later words in the speech refer to eyes, ears, and tongue, a wider image than ears only,

Without eyes, ears, and harmful sound of words,

in his contrast of day with night. (It is hardly consonant with the image of a *course* of Night, by the way.) I feel bound to report a parallel phrase which supports the reading *ear*, and which does not seem to have been cited:

I have heard

Two emulous Philomels beate the eare o’ th’ night.

(*The Two Noble Kinsmen*, v. 3. 141–2.)

But I see no plausible explanation of the compositor’s misreading *eare* as *race*, a difficulty which Dover Wilson clearly feels acutely.

READ: *Sound on into the drowsy face of night;*

3.52 *brooded watchfull day,*

Pope read *broad-eyed* for *brooded*, followed by *New Cambridge* but not by other recent editors. I do not follow the advantage of such a change, or the objection to the Folio reading. *brooded* and *watchful* go admirably together and are almost synonymous except for the image implicit in

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brooded. The contrast is with *drowsy night* above. *Brooding* is not 'in melancholic absorption' here, but 'jealously vigilant'. (Chapman's *broad-eyed* is rather different from the Greek 'broad-seeing'.) And it is very difficult to justify such a misprint on any plausible grounds.

READ: *brooded*

3.65–6 John. *Death*.

Hub. *My Lord*.

John. *A Graue*.

Hub. *He shall not liue*.

Editors all read *My Lord*? It is a small point, but of much significance in the acting and interpretation, and the Folio *My Lord* seems to me right. The trend of John's thought has become clear to Hubert already. His *My Lord* is not an exclamation or surprised question. It is submissive, understanding, and decisive, and follows naturally what has gone before. Certainly, there is no necessity to alter the Folio, thus read, or to assume that punctuation is always negligible.

4.182 *Strong reasons makes strange actions*:

For *strange* F 2 reads *strong*, and most editors follow, though not Malone or Kittredge, i.e. not 'all modern editors', as Dover Wilson reports. I agree with Malone that the emendation in F 2 is officious. That such an error was easy to make is not evidence that it was in fact made. Why should the First Folio compositor have made it, having read the first *strong* correctly, unless he were setting up as editor and disapproving the repetition? *strange actions* makes perfectly good sense, and seems to me a much more effective phrase here than the repeated *strong*. It refers back, moreover, to Pandulph's words just before:

'Tis *wonderful*

What may be wrought out of their discontent,

READ: *Strong reasons make strange actions*.